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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: TIP INTERVIEW, HUMAN RIGHTS AS "AMERICAN BLACKMAIL"

REF: MUSCAT 894

¶1. SUMMARY: "Times of Oman" and "Al-Shabiba" highlight G/TIP Ambassador Mark Lagon's interview on trafficking; "Al-Watan" criticizes Ambassador Grappo's defense of the Trafficking in Persons report and calls the report part of "American Blackmail." Other "Al-Watan" editorials criticize human rights in U.S. foreign policy and the "hollow democracy" that the U.S. is calling for in Iraq and Afghanistan. END SUMMARY.

COVERAGE

¶2. On Monday, September 24, Arabic-language, privately owned daily "Al-Shabiba" (circulation 20,000) and its sister English-language paper "Times of Oman" (circulation 25,000) carried an interview with Ambassador Mark Lagon, Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP). The "Times" ran the interview on page four under the headline, "Sultanate Committed to Ensuring Dignity of Workers: U.S. Official" and "Al-Shabiba" front-paged an introduction, with a continuation on page three that featured a large photo of Ambassador Lagon and the headline "Omani-American Agreement to Strengthen Anti-Trafficking in Persons Laws." The interviewer, Mohammed al Balushi, was a 2006 Edward R. Murrow Fellow.

¶3. The Arabic-language article ran as an interview, while the English text was a shorter summary interspersed with quotes from Ambassador Lagon. Both highlighted Ambassador Lagon's consultations with Omani officials about TIP and presented the issue as a shared concern of both governments that they are working together to address.

BLOCK QUOTES: HUMAN RIGHTS IS "AMERICAN BLACKMAIL"

¶4. On Friday, September 21, Arabic daily "Al-Watan" (circulation 42,000) published editorials about U.S. foreign policy and human rights on a page topped with "Human Rights: American Blackmail." The lead editorial criticized the Trafficking in Persons report and Ambassador Grappo's defense of it (REFTEL). Excerpts of this and the other "Al-Watan" editorials follow:
"The U.S. Department of State persists in issuing annual human rights reports that cover all aspects of the issue (whether economic, social, cultural, religious, racial, or political) and that monitor nations' respect for human rights. This U.S. effort could have gained the world's admiration if Washington had detached

it from its own political goals and intentions and those of its allies, such as Israel, whose interests take precedence to the interests of America itself. Although there are some countries and governments that have friendly relations with the U.S.A, and America has key interests in these countries, we find that Washington sacrifices these relations on many occasions for the sake of political blackmail. It uses human rights to pressure friendly governments in order to obtain from them political stances in its favor or in the favor of its ally, i.e. Israel. No country in the world has managed to escape this U.S. political blackmailing, including our country, for which all the world stood as witness for its respect to human rights. The last picture of this blackmailing is the Trafficking in Persons report, which was defended by the U.S. Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, despite the fact that this report was founded on very weak bases, if we ever supposed that it has any bases at all."

U.S. "IGNORES CRIMES" IN IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN

¶15. An Iraqi lawyer resident in Oman added a commentary entitled "The Legal Response to American Blackmailing about Trafficking in Persons":

"Omani Labor Law occupies a very prominent position among the other laws. This is due to its compliance with the international labor laws. No doubt, this law is considered as one of the most high-ranking laws among its peers, as it always endeavors to meet the interests of both the employer and employee. This could be evidenced in articles 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 18 and 20 of this law. So, has the U.S. Department of State ever viewed these articles? And has it seen the terms and conditions guaranteed by Oman's Labor Law and other Omani laws to prevent any trading in persons or any other such crimes? Don't all these laws prove that the Sultanate of Oman has done its utmost to fight such violations and protect against them as well as against any other crimes? The articles that we have

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mentioned from Oman's Labor law are just a few examples; there are many others that serve the same purpose. If this paper wants us to write about them, we can supply it with many other examples, but we have tried to give just a summary of them. In fact, the practical realities that we see in the courts of justice are other proofs that support our opinion and the opinion of "Al-Watan" newspaper to counter the U.S. Department of State's report, which ignores the crimes that are committed in Iraq and Afghanistan under the pretext of the hollow democracy that Americans are calling for. The State Department's allegations could be summed up by the Arabic verse that says: Your tongue should never reveal the deficiencies of other people, since you are full of deficiencies and the people have tongues."

AMERICA'S "BASELESS ALLEGATIONS"

¶16. Muhammad al Khalig, an Egyptian expatriate on the staff of "Al-Watan" wrote about "Washington and the Humanitarian Game":

"The American 'friend' has started to charge its Gulf friends of 'trafficking in persons' although the history of this area is rich in examples of defending humanitarian causes. No one objects to the wish of any expatriate in this area to earn a livelihood so long as he respects the culture, beliefs, and traditions of the peaceful Gulf people, among whom are the Omani people. Each road or street in Oman and each establishment in this country expresses its respect to the whole humanity and gives the chance to every resident to take his or her chance to find a good means of living and exercise his or her beliefs freely. Despite all these clear facts, we are surprised to hear about a report issued by the U.S. Department of State that included the Sultanate with other countries that allegedly traffick in persons. Although whatever is issued by the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Administration is not generally obligatory to any other country, the Gulf citizen has the right to be surprised for this American venture of baseless accusations... No one in the Gulf region needs to prove this report's discrepancies. It is quite sufficient for the report writers to have a tour of the streets of Muscat or any other Gulf capital to see by their own eyes the spirit of tolerance and forbearance that dominates this area and the

respect that all residents get in these countries. Let them also have a look at the rules that regulate the employment of the expatriate laborers to discover the effort of the public institutions in applying the international standards, not the imbalanced American standards, which are connected to pressures that we have no time to mention here."

EXCESSES IN OMAN ARE INDIVIDUAL "EXCEPTIONS"

¶7. The head of public relations for the "Omantel" company wrote about "Human Rights in the Sultanate of Oman:"
"We should not view ourselves as citizens of the 'Virtuous City' of Plato. Excesses might occur here and there sometimes, on individual bases, and this may happen in all communities without exception, due to coexistence between different people. However we can not say that such practices are organized by any official party or institution. It is merely an exceptional behavior and should not be generalized, or fastened on countries that are doing their best and for a long time to protect the rights of others, just as they are protecting the right of their citizens. These countries are facilitating the way to justice to prevail against any excesses regardless of the person who commits them... Any bad practice is also rejected by our sublime religion and our norms and traditions... The Sultanate of Oman's policy in regards to respecting human rights has become a pioneer in recognizing the humanity of every person and respecting his or her rights and dignity. What needs to be documented with great pride and pleasure is that the gains of this blessed renaissance are not restricted to the material development and progress only, but to the high value given to the people and their human rights and dignity."

FONTENEAU